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FAIR CHASE AND THE FIGHT AGAINST DRONES

A scrappy group of backcountry hunters wants to keep drones away from wildlife—and they're winning.

JIMMY TOBIAS · UPDATED: JUN 14, 2017 · ORIGINAL: MAR 1, 2016

In the winter of 2013, a drone buzzed across an open field on the outskirts of Oslo, Norway, and homed in on its target. It edged into a stand of trees and tracked down a hulking female moose, hovering so close to her snout that she tried to nuzzle up to the strange camera-equipped device. After recording the encounter, the drone departed and the resulting video, casually titled "Da Moose," ended up on [YouTube](#). It got 900,000 hits. People loved it.

More than 4,000 miles away, however, in Missoula, Montana, a cohort of conservation-minded sportsmen and women saw the footage and balked.

"There was an immediate uproar," says Tim Brass, state policy manager at the conservation group [Backcountry Hunters and Anglers](#). "Our members were like, no way, these things do not belong in the hunting field, they shouldn't be used to scout animals."

After "Da Moose" went viral, BHA became deeply concerned that cheap drone technology could upend American hunting culture and harm wildlife, giving some hunters an advantage over others and making it far too easy to kill game. The group, which works to preserve traditional hunting practices and protect wild land, immediately launched a campaign to ban the use of drones for hunting and scouting in states around the country. The campaign has seen great success and it is a lesson in conservation ethics, particularly the bedrock principle of self-restraint. It's also a blueprint for those who want to prevent disruptive consumer products—whether drones, smartphones, or advanced off-road vehicles—from flooding into wild areas, where they might harm wildlife and make traditional skills like hunting, orienteering, and backcountry travel obsolete. With its small army of big game lovers and wilderness adventurers, BHA is trying hard to prevent that outcome.

The North American model of wildlife conservation is one of this country's proudest accomplishments. Originating, at least in part, with late 19th-century conservation icons like George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Boone and Crockett Club, the model emphasizes public ownership of wildlife populations, equal access to hunting opportunities, protection of habitat, and respect for wildlife as an enduring natural resource. It arose in the era of commercial hunting, when the trade in hides and meat led to the slaughter of tens of millions of bison and other big game across the continent. Backed by a growing conservation movement, with hunters providing crucial [financial support](#), the model led to the prohibition of most market hunting and put scientists and sportsmen in charge of wildlife management. We can thank this conservation approach for the animal abundance we enjoy today, from robust elk herds in the West to growing bison populations on the Great Plains to the flocks of wild turkey that occasionally [terrorize](#) residents in suburban New Jersey.

At the heart of the North American model is the sporting code called "fair chase." Fair chase originated in the late 19th century from the Boone and Crockett club's effort to promote a culture of self-restraint among hunters and sporting people. The code has influenced a wide variety of hunting and fishing regulations that limit the kinds of weapons, technology, and tactics humans can use to kill prey. It is meant to level the playing field between people, with our big brains and rifles, and the animals that we pursue. It means you don't ride around on the back of a pick-up truck and mow down deer with a machine gun; it means you don't shoot a sitting duck; it means you don't use a drone.

"If it is just about flying a drone in and finding elk, then the hunt is gone," says Jim Posewitz, a Montana-based hunter, wildlife advocate, and writer. "And with it the whole model, which has done so much for wildlife in this country."

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Preserving the fair chase principle is what sent BHA members to state fish and game commissions around the country, where they lobbied against drone use in the hunting fields. Since 2013, the campaign has had success in 11 states, including most of the Rocky Mountain region. Montana, Colorado, Alaska, New Mexico, and Idaho, among others, all have bans in place thanks to BHA's work with willing state commissions. Some places, like California, already had effective bans on the books before the campaign began. Each state's policy is slightly different, but they generally prohibit drones for hunting or hunting-related scouting year round. What these measures *don't* do is prohibit drones for scientific research, fire suppression, rescue missions, and other legitimate uses. BHA is also working with Nevada and Wyoming, where officials are expected to pass drone prohibitions by summertime.

"It is our responsibility as sportsmen and women to keep the relationship between hunter and prey, and that involves skill," says Karen Boeger, who helps lead BHA's efforts in Nevada. "We see drones as crossing the line and giving improper advantage to the hunter."

Boeger's comment brings to mind Wendell Berry and his writing on technological innovation. New technology, he wrote in a famous 1987 essay, "should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships." BHA sees drones as disruptive of the *relationship* between sporting people and wildlife, a relationship of respect and fairness that is at the heart of American's conservation legacy.

The drone campaign comes just in time. The market for such devices is on fire. Last July, the Consumer Electronics Association, an industry trade group, projected that 700,000 drones would be sold within the United States in 2015, a 63 percent increase from the previous year. And CEA estimates that individual drone sales inside the U.S. will climb to 2.8 million devices in 2016. If BHA's members had waited to take action until today, they might have come up against stiff resistance.

"Every time some new technology like this comes out, we need to put the brakes on for a moment and ask whether it is appropriate," Boeger says. "If we don't address new technologies right in the beginning, then people quickly begin to feel like it is their right to use it."

This, perhaps, is the most important component of BHA's effort. Unlike, say, off-road vehicles, which spread like brush fire in the 1970s before conservationists became fully aware of their destructive impact on wildlife and ecosystems, BHA organized against inappropriate drone use while it was still in its infancy. The campaign is a road map for how conservationists might manage innovation in the future—identify technologies that could disrupt wildlife, the landscape, or conservationist culture, and try to constrain them before they become ubiquitous. Many such technologies and projects, like Google's plan to expand its commercial street view enterprise into the backcountry, are worth scrutinizing already.

BHA's work is a boon for wildlife, which might otherwise become easy prey for technology-savvy drone operators. It's also a boon for hunters, fishing enthusiasts, and their ilk, people who maintain close ties with the land and its wild creatures. Sportsmen and women, and their culture of self-restraint, are worth defending. They have been a crucial mainstay of America's conservation movement for more than a century.